The Kowie History Museum and Historical Research

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1. Introduction

And so, the end of a phase in the history of the Kowie History Museum in Port Alfred (South Africa) is near.[1] In our view, there are two reasons for this point of departure: firstly, as a result of the on-going problem of having to find new premises to house the current Museum since it has been sold, and secondly, because of a recent call (by the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Museum, Mr H. Marais) for the Museum to become more representative of the diverse cultures of the Eastern Cape.[2] Fortunately, the so-called end-of–history theory is nothing new – as are the controversies surrounding the phenomenon of historical periodization.[3] Best known today, is probably Francis Fukuyama's book *End of History and the Last Man*[4] published two decades ago. Similarly, and about eight years later, Jacques Barzun wrote in the opening lines of his *From Dawn to Decadence* "that in the West the culture of the last 500 years is ending."[5]

Roughly four decades ago, and long before Fukuyama and Barzun's respective popular publications, Mr B. C. Wilmot (the then Director of the Albany Museum in Grahamstown, South Africa) was invited to deliver an address to the Lower Albany Historical Society's Annual General Meeting about the possible establishment of a local museum in Port Alfred.[6] His intentions, Wilmot said, were to give a balanced personal view about such proposed project, because at the outset of his address, he made it clear that he wanted to be frank in his views. On the one hand, this frankness was expressed in the conviction that he regarded the establishing of a museum in Port Alfred as a "laudable one deserving of encouragement." At the same time however, he would not spare his audience the "problems and pitfalls inherent in a project of this nature."[7] In our view, Wilmot's even-handed perspective was underlined by the fact that he took cognisance of the "Port Alfred side of the story" but that he also wanted to convey "other aspects of the matter''[8] that might not have been too familiar to the audience and other interested parties. In a nutshell, Wilmot wanted to present both sides of the story. Therefore, in accordance with the objectivity criteria for the historian, he wanted to "tell you what I know"[9] but (and) simultaneously, it is clear that he had high regards for the facts of the matter[10] which he wanted to communicate to his listeners. In addition, our view is that he "did his

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[1] I wish to thank the following: Mr H. Marais of *The Announcer,* and Mr J. Howzit of *Talk of the Town.* Both kindly drew my attention to relevant sources. In addition, Mr D. Schuurman, the current Curator of the Kowie History Museum, kindly made sources available. However, the views herein remain mine.

[2] Houzet, J. "Kowie Museum Seeks to be More Representative" in http://peherald.com/blog/Talk-of-the Town/, 3 Aug. 2012.

[3] Carr, E. H. *What is History?*, pp.60-61.

[4] See Fukuyama, F. *The End of History and the Last Man.*

[5] Barzun, J. *From Dawn to Decadence. 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life*, p.ix.

[6] Wilmot, B. C. "Some Thoughts on the Establishment of a Museum in Port Alfred", in *Toposcope,* Vol.xii, 1981, pp.3-8.

[7] *Ibid.,* p.3.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.,* p.8. See also Engelbrecht, C. "Limitations in History. Part I: Problems With Historical Facts", in

homework" well because he explained that he consulted with different interested parties of the immediate society regarding this new project.

Whilst one might have agreed with much of Wilmot's address at the time, the purpose of this paper is to revisit some of the ideas that he presented at the A. G. M. and to determine if such are still relevant today. By implication we imply that we have to some extent, come to the end of Wilmot's arguments of some four decades ago.

2. Some of Wilmot's views in 1981 – and some of ours, today

Wilmot argued that the 25-30 years prior to his address[11] (meaning roughly the period from the 1950s onwards), were characterized by marked changes about the thinking in (and about) museums - changes that were brought about by technological advancements, professionalism and specialization, and lastly, as a result of new social needs[12] that stem from changing society, at large. It is about the social needs that we can no longer concur with Wilmot's reference to "mainly urban communities,"[13] that he made at the time.

Much of present-day political emphasis in South Africa is placed on the development of rural communities. During a recent television broadcast in September 2012, President Zuma made it clear that he will never be apologetic about government monies and efforts spent on rural community development. Today, various cultural and educational projects in rural areas are funded by state and private sector money in their attempts to redress the imbalances of the part. In many present-day museums, their new post-apartheid displays and collections for instance, confirm this tendency as matter of fact. In addition, whether museums "take displays to the rural communities" or "bring the rural communities to the museum," is hardly the issue – the point is rather one of much needed exposure by, and to, all population groups for non-direct political gain of our historical consciousness. This greater exposure to society at large, does not have to be more to one community than to another, or more of one kind of material at the expense of the other – rather, it is about bringing up to speed that which has been neglected in the past (not only under apartheid) in order to make history more representative of all communities. In other words, the strategy should be "to add on" or "build upon" instead of "chucking" out, museology practices. It needs to be all-inclusive, for want of a better phrase.

In this regard Judy Mohraz, president and CEO of the Piper Charitable Trust (of Phoenix, Arizona) said that supporting local community organisations helps them to expand their audience. This results in improved financial stability and in turn brings more outreach to the constituent community. In this reciprocal relationship between the Phoenix Museum and Arizona's Hispanic population[14] both parties seem to have engaged on a win-win strategy. Mike Dodd made the same point. In a case study relating to sports museums in Atlanta, Massachusetts and Kansas, he emphasized that museums are most often not destinations themselves, and thus rely on vibrant communities to pull visitors through its doors.[15] It is doubtful whether the proposed museum in Port Alfred then, and today, would have been, or is, in any different position.

Currently, one can still agree with Wilmot's view about the practice (or implementation) of the primary function of a museum, *viz.* "that of serving as an archive or storehouse."[16] Likewise, one can

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Toposcope, Vol.xli, 2010, pp.40-52.

[11] Wilmot, B. C. *op. cit.,* p.3.

[12] *Ibid.,* pp.3-4.

[13] *Ibid.,* p.4.

[14] Scott, E. "Museums Reach Out", in *USA Today,* 30 Jan. 2012.

[15] Dodd, M. "Coping Strategies for Sport Museums", in *USA Today,* 28 Nov. 2011.

[16] Wilmot, B. C. *op. cit.* (Underlined emphasis in original.)

agree with Wilmot's views that "museums to-day are not just collections."[17] The issue here is the fine line between what historians do and ought not to do. Harrison Wright's view was that "in their capacity as historians, they will serve that purpose best not by directly using their historical work to promote their particular social purposes."[18]

About Wilmot's second function for museums, namely that of conducting and promoting research, we wish to add a few points. Research in this context, we propose, is of two types – formal and informal *internal* research, and formal and informal *external* research. Firstly, *formal internal* research is such that is usually carried out by employees of the museum. Such work generally pertains to specific research objectives. It might form part of an official plan or program of research, and is seen as "official." One could argue that it is of strategic nature for the institution. Of a second nature, is *informal internal* research that is conducted by a member (or members) of staff without it being part of their formal duties to do so, or, since at the time, they might not be involved with current formal internal research. Such research is sometimes conducted out self-interest but the museum still benefits from the research results.

A second type of research is external research. *Formal external* research refers to e.g. commissioned research where the commissioning agent has formally asked and went into an agreement, with outsiders, to do certain research required. The commissioning party probably presented their research plan and fee structure. The second type of external research is *informal external* research. Here outsiders conduct their own research and present it to the museums thus benefitting from such informal external outsider interest and or skills. These kinds of research reflect a certain symbiotic relationship between museum staff and the community – in both instances they benefit from the strengths and weaknesses of the other. Again, we think Wilmot was correct since technological advances, professionalism and specialization, and social needs necessitate such collaborative efforts.

Wilmot's view that "[t]hey [meaning museums] now can and must constitute in the community a vital element,"[19] needs to be expanded. Whilst we agree with Wilmot that the educational aspect of museums is practiced differently today,[20] the "education for what?" remains the issue. There can be no doubt that in current South Africa the educational objectives have a political intent – e.g. one of nation-building. Whether such is a primary or secondary objective, is a moot point, but the cross-cultural understanding and promotion of the multi-cultural historical past and (in) a still deeply divided contemporary reality, cannot be wished away. Cleary, the intent should be to benefit all South Africans and hopefully the memory of the apartheid past will wither away. In such attempts the focus should be truth and reconciliation – and in both instances, museums have and important moral obligation. There is therefore, a fine line between nation-building and the increasing ANC-ification of post-apartheid South African society.

In arguing this, we have, to a limited extent, attended to Wilmot's view of "where it [a museum] finds itself and on whom it serves."[21] Since all South Africans - urban or rural, should be involved and the whole nation should benefit, continued cultural elitism is in fact, ruled out. However, it does not deny the persistent practices thereof. For decades now, South African historiography constantly refers to the lack of black history – meaning history written by black historians.[22] And for decades now, and

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[17] *Ibid.*

[18] Wright, H. *The Burden of the Present. Liberal-radical Controversy over Southern African History,* pp.103-104.

[19] Wilmot, B. C. *op. cit.*

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] *Ibid.,* p.5.

[22] Wright, H. *op. cit*., p.104. See also Saunders, C. *The Making of the South African Past. Major Historians on Race and Class,* pp.192-197; Smith, K. *The Changing Past. Trends in South African Historical Writing,* pp.155-221.

without fail, apartheid (read Whites are) is blamed for the lack thereof. Such finger-pointing history is no history at all but merely the perpetuation of historical myth. Often the reality remains that tribalism in South Africa complicates objectivity. Modern local museums can go a long way to contribute to address this shortcoming – without compromising their budgetary constraints or promoting novel forms of neo-domination.

Our main point of disagreement with Wilmot is about the scope or "sphere of interest" of a local museum. Naturally, and we agree, that local museums serve local interests, and of course, a local museum is smaller in physical size than e.g. a national museum. One can also agree with Wilmot about the "planless" collection of material that could give rise to the establishment of countless museums accordingly. This does not however, equate to plan for *less*. Our disagreement is with Wilmot's view that "[i]t is now widely agreed that it should not merely primarily concern itself with local affairs, but it should do so to the almost total exclusion of the wider world."[23] Our disagreement stems from his notion of "widely agreed" – by whom, and how wide, is this agreement? Secondly, what does "almost total exclusion"[24] means? Is the exclusion "almost" or "total"? Regardless, but when taken together, we disagree with Wilmot's reference to the exclusion of the "wider world,"[25] for a few reasons. Our view ties in well with what we find in Gibbon's *Decline & Fall of the Roman Empire* namely that "[e]very national history, to be complete, must, in a certain sense, be the history of Europe; there is no knowing to how remote a quarter it may be necessary to trace our most domestic events; from a country, how apparently disconnected, may originate the impulse which gives its direction to the whole course of events."[26] One cannot deny that the world has changed remarkably since Wilmot's presentation in the early 1980s.

Firstly, local events and history thereof can never be separated from the wider national and international community. The truism of "think global and act local," whilst it can be wished away, is not a fruitful research strategy. Such promotes cultural exclusivism and isolation. There is no doubt that historians place (or should place) their research topic/s in context. This historicity[27] is not only a minimum requirement of good historical practice, but rather a necessary condition thereof. Interestingly, the St Peter's Museum "present[s] a visual exploration of the former Soviet Union's *ideology*."[28] This means that the focus of museums has changed – they now feature as "living museums rather than a place of formal cultural venue." The reality is, and history has shown, that attempts to eradicate, or escape from a historical consciousness, somehow always failed. Similarly, historical research has shown that history is not only "made," or written, by the "victors." The move towards the developing of the writing of "history from below," during the 1980s, testifies to this as does the application of oral tradition.

Secondly, our colonial past forces us to be cognisant of the imperial practices which European mother countries bestowed on their colonial peripheries in their perpetuation of colonial material self-interest.[29] For this reason, too localised perspectives can overlook "the rich history of the district"[30] and can be *a-priory* restrictive in its outcomes.

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[23] Wilmot, B. C. *op. cit.*

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] See the Preface by the Editor of Gibbon, E. *The Decline & Fall of the Roman Empire.*

[27] See for instance Popper, K. *The Poverty of Historicism.*

[28] Washington, I. "Museums in St. Petersburg, Russia", in *USA Today, 16 March 2010,* in <http://traveltips.usatoday.com/museum-st-peters>. (Emphasis added).

[29] Engelbrecht, C. "Marx's Theory of Colonisation and Contemporary Eastern Cape (South Africa) Historiography", in <http://independent.academia.edu.christoengelbrecht/Papers1755482>, pp.1-17.

[30] Wilmot, B. C. *op. cit.*

Furthermore, but not separate from the above, is the spirited rise of the globalization reality. Wilmot is correct about the technological advancement, professionalism and specialization about new thinking regarding museums, and it is mostly the instantaneousness of present-day communication through various forms of media, that has shrunk the world to a mere local backyard.[31] Such makes the linking of the local to the global immediate and a necessary requirement. They are it seems, the flipside of the same modern coin. The argument is that focused local research widens up the perspectives to include the global realities. For instance, technology is available to scan in at home a pottery artefact found on an isolated beach and (with some luck) almost immediately one can place such find in its international context. Such information would have far reaching impact on the researcher's interpretation/s of his local material.

Lastly, the recent rise of Global History, as a distinct historical field of study, where focus starts with the widest reference point and is narrowed down to the local, can find great benefit in local history museums' inspired research and should yield new research results. Local history research results can be made globally available at the click of a button to a much wider audience that has hitherto been the case. In a sense, the withering away of all constraints is the subject of the globalization of the local.

Unwittingly, Wilmot gave an answer to some of the above problems. He wrote that "[t]oo many of us think in clichés and we are content to accept other people's views and decisions."[32] This, together with his view that "museums to-day are not just collections"[33] and when considered against the aims and objectives of The Lower Albany Historical Society,[34] makes this paper relevant for historical research that is initiated by the Kowie History Museum. Against this background, Maree's call for greater representatively of the Kowie History museum is both justified and timely.

3. Conclusion

The South African Museums Association defined museums as "dynamic and accountable public institutions which both shape and manifest the conciousness [*sic*], identities and understanding of communities and individuals in relation to their natural, historical and cultural environments, through collection, documentation, conservation, research and education programmes that are responsive to the needs of society."[35]

Since intellectual landscapes are constantly changing,[36] the same is true of our conceptions of the natural environment.[37] Therefore, keeping both in mind, the current period of change for the Kowie

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[31] Engelbrecht, C. "Globalization Theory and Reference to Aspects of Eastern Cape (South Africa) History", in <http://africalit.nai.uu.se/exlibris/aleph/a18>, pp.1-10.

[32] Wilmot, B. C. *op. cit.,* p.6. See also for instance Engelbrecht, C. "Limitations in History. Part II. Theory and Eastern Cape Historical Research", in <http://independent.academia.edu.christo>, pp.1-12.

[33] Wilmot, B. C. *op cit.,* p.4.

[34] See for instance the [Editor] "Constitution. Lower Albany Historical Society", in *Toposcope,* Vol. xv, 1984, pp.75-81; the [Editor.] "The Aims and Objectives of the Lower Albany Historical Society: A Reminder", in *Toposcope,* Vol.xxx, 1999, p.50; the [Editor.] "Extract from Lower Albany Historical Society Constitution (2002)", in *Toposcope,* Vol.xlii, 2012, p.76.

[35] South African Museums Association. "Definition of a Museum", in <www.sama.za.net/index.php?option>.

[36] Horkheimer, M. *Dawn and Decline. Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1960*, p.25.

[37] Engelbrecht, C. "Max Horkheimer and Environmental History. A Case for the Greater Kowie Region (Eastern Cape, South Africa)", in <independent.academia.edu/christoengelbrecht>, pp.1-15.

History Museum refutes any false-consciousness regarding illusions of keeping the Museum exclusive or non-representative in future.

The above approach blurs the traditional boundaries between geographic, temporal or disciplinary specializations and therefore links (local) people and (global) places. Thus, it connects the relationship between historical events and our current wider world. In so doing, it broadens the "situational situation"[38] of local and global events and our new perspectives thereof. Annual audits of yearly acquisitions and research projects will reflect the shift of focus in the process of renewal. Likewise, the deaccessioning of artefacts is outlined in the guidelines of the South African Museums Association.

Therefore, as we approach a new phase in the history of the Kowie History Museum in a cultural environment that is rapidly changing through global media and new technologies, we need cultural studies that analyse the political economy of global culture industries, the proliferation of new media technologies and artefacts, and their appreciations by all audiences[39] - including the local. Lastly, museum management needs to find a balance between the primacy of politics[40] and their own autonomous mission statements and values or face the consequences of being held responsible for promoting the interests of forces that could lead to new forms of barbarism.[41] An awareness of Critical Theory[42] would assist to guard against such since it is in closely association with the ideals of enlightenment.

Finally, I need to mention that there is a philosophical side to this debate.[43] It hinges on the critical juxtaposing of different ways of being "located" and the self-consciousness thereof. In addition, this debate centres on the interest of the organizing of space in post-modernist and post-apartheid South Africa. The key concepts are e.g. *de*-territorialisation, marginality, cultural difference and space. This critical interest questions traditional, seemingly unproblematic two-dimensional conceptions of space, as being naturally discontinuous or that there is such givens as e.g. a "settler" or "Xhosa" cultures or identity. Given the high level of contemporary societal migration, it questions the notions of e.g. multiculturalism and/or subcultures. In post-colonial and post-apartheid contexts, should one not rather support the principle of a "new culture", challenging the traditional conceptions of the politics of space and the Other? The *re*-territorialisation of space in the historical process, questions old ideas of imagined cultures, attached to imagined places, with seemingly natural connections between peoples, their "cultures" and their spaces. The "illusion of a natural and essential connection between […] place and […] culture [is thus] broken."[44] Any museum claiming to be representative needs to take cognisance of such globally interconnected world and thrive on the philosophy of *le différence* and politics of Other. It links modern social philosophy to history with a practical intent that aims at

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[38] Horkheimer, M. "A New Concept of Ideology?", in Horkheimer, M. *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings.* (Translated by G. F. Hunter; M. S. Kramer, and J. Torpey. Introduction by G. F. Hunter), p.129.

[39] Keller, D. "The Frankfurt School and British Cultural Studies: The Missed Articulation", in McGuigen, J. (ed.) *Cultural Methodologies,* pp.12-41.

[40] Van Reijen, W. and J. Bransen. "The Disappearance of Class History in *Dialectic of Enlightenment."* A Commentary on the Textual Variants (1947 and 1944), in Horkheimer, M. and T. W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* pp.248-252.

[41] Horkheimer M. and T. W. Adorno. *op. cit.,* pp.xiv-xix.

[42] Horkheimer, M. *Critical Theory. Selected Essays.* See also Engelbrecht, C. "Traditional and Critical Theory – Any Relevance for Aspects of Eastern Cape (South Africa) History?", in <http://www.jakobsgaardstoltenresearch.dk/guest/laia.htm>, pp.1-14.

[43] I wish to thank Y. Kunvar (MA student in Anthropology, Rhodes University) for bringing to my attention the work by Gupta, A. and J. Ferguson. "Beyond "Culture": Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference", in *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol.7, No.1, 1992, pp.6-23. I have greatly benefitted from their paper.

[44] *Ibid.*

overthrowing the existing systems of institutions[45] by employing purposive-rational techniques[46] in order to eliminate suffering and the promoting of concrete human happiness.[47]

Therefore, we conclude and agree that a museum is no longer just a place where local artefacts are collected and exhibited. Such traditional practice can most certainly not stand independent from the wider world, nor can any form of cultural exclusiveness reign over demographic representativeness in current South Africa. Normatively speaking institutions of memory can play a leading role in the understanding of the past, present and future.

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[45] Habermas, J. *Theory and Practice,* pp.1-2

[46] *Ibid.,* p.254.

[47] *Ibid.*

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